

Saigon, VietNam

24 April 1967

The Honorable
Robert W. Komer
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Dear Bob:

Although the various messages from you, direct and indirect, may not have speeded my recovery, they have certainly made it more pleasant and raised my morale. I am not sure if my response at this point, however, will do the same for you, but I certainly want to help the cause as much as I can.

While I was in Bangkok, the Saigon Embassy relayed your message inviting me to join your working staff in Washington. The Mission suggested that I postpone answering you until I got back to Saigon (nothing sinister here; I think they just didn't want to tax me.) My return was delayed, but I got back a couple of days ago, after three weeks in bed there. I hear that you are expected May 1st -- though no one seems to know for sure, so this letter may not reach you before your departure; but, I don't want to let more time go by without answering your flattering proposal (just before I left Bangkok, your letter was forwarded -- it was written, I take it, before the cable and before you learned I had hepatitis -- and last night John Vann, just back, passed on your comments from Washington about my staying).

First of all, my immediate prospects are for three more weeks of confinement to my quarters, mainly in bed (this is consistent with my getting a lot of useful work done during the coming month so long as I continue to get secretarial help, since I have an enormous amount of dictating to do). After that time, according to the doctors, I can get about, but should maintain a reduced load, avoiding exertion, for at least another month or two. Apparently, the immediate effect to be expected from too much activity is simply exhaustion (I got a good demonstration of this on my trip from Bangkok to Saigon the other day); however, the more serious risk is of permanent damage to the functioning of the liver if I fail to get enough rest in the next 2-3 months. The consensus of exhepatitis sufferers and doctors seems to be that in about two months from now, I should be able to work and to get around normally, although still avoiding unusual exertion (that is, foregoing the field work with combat units, which I have especially enjoyed in the last few months); whereas after six months, if I take care of myself in the meantime, I will be able to go back to heavy drinking, skin diving, wearing packs in rice paddies, etc.

My purpose in going to Bangkok while you were in Guan was to take what I thought would be my last chance at a rest before you arrived in Saigon (My sudden desire for rest, the day before I left, was the opening symptom, it turned out, of my hepatitis. I spent the next week lying exhausted on the beach at Pattaya, before I went to see a doctor, who put me in a nursing home for intravenous feeding). Without having heard from you, I was hoping and expecting to stay on with you in a position similar to the one I had with Porter, and I was looking forward to this very much. Of course, I'm pleased to see in the messages from you that you had the same idea. But, as you indicated in the cabled message, my present state does affect the situation; moreover, I have had a month on my back devoted largely to introspection and reflection on what I should be doing the next few years. The latter soul searching would not have changed my plans if I still had all the energy I had at the time that I first heard you were coming to Saigon.

Though I expected, with regret, that I would no longer have the excuse or the time to work directly with combat units, I was looking forward to a stretch of intense activity, covering a great deal of ground in the countryside and shaping things up. It was a very exciting prospect that my reporting and suggestions could be plugged into an energy source and amplifier like you, with your openness to new ideas, activist bent and decisiveness. I'm still glad that VietNam -- and the United States -- will benefit from these qualities; but it no longer looks so healthy for me -- at least for the next several months -- ^{to be} tied into your operation in the way that I would have liked it.

I certainly do, of course, feel an obligation -- to my country and you, as a friend -- to try to communicate to the new team what I have learned in the last two years that seems relevant to current and future problems. Since I can dictate from my bed, I expect to be able to fulfill this responsibility fairly adequately during the next month or so. After that, rather than hang around, confined to Saigon, picking away at work even on a half-time (or even full time; but not double time) basis, I would frankly like to get out of here. I have seen my kids only once in the last 20 months, and I am tired of that situation; as of this moment, I am planning to go back to Rand at the beginning of summer.

Although I don't propose to make VietNam my life's study (I imagine you feel the same way, although you may be surprised) the intellectual and emotional commitment I have made to it in the last three years will, I'm sure, keep me spending more than half of my time on VietNam matters for the next year or so, one way or another.

One reason Harry Rowen has been particularly anxious for me to get back to Rand by the end of June, in fact, has been to take part in a 2-month seminar/conference on Revolutionary War. You might say that it is both more educational and useful to take part in a Revolutionary War than to study them in general; but, after three years as a participant/observer in Government, my basic ^{instincts} strengths to step back and to reflect and analyze are pretty strong and this illness, in any case, tilts the scales in favor

of reflection, rather than involvement. However, your proposal that I join your working staff suggests to me the welcome possibility that I could tie in with your operation as a consultant, from Rand, and I would be prepared to spend as much time at this as I could be useful. Moreover, by the fall, when my energy output should no longer be entirely out of phase with yours, I would be glad to return to VietNam for some limited period to help in any way that I could.

Just before I left for Bangkok, a bunch of us got together to draft some papers for your attention on your arrival: new ideas, ^{CRITIQUE} ~~criticisms~~, recommendations, etc. I haven't seen the results yet and my own draft was, of course, interrupted; but I did make a good many notes on thoughts I wanted to pass on to you while I was in the hospital, and I will be transcribing from these this week. However, I will take this opportunity to mention a few things that may be more closely related to your personal role.

First, as you are well aware, you and your colleagues are not coming into a working system where everything is going along pretty well, where policies and organization are sound and functioning "as well as could be expected", "getting the job done" and serving US interests adequately, and where your only responsibility is to make the transition of office holders as smooth as possible. It might be going too far to say, rather, that you are coming into a bankrupt organization and set of policies; but there is no question at all that change, in many ways, is desperately needed and overdue. There is much to be said about the substantive changes in attitude and policy -- as well as personality and tactics, but I won't try to say much about these in this letter -- which I hope to get off today. But, there are a couple of matters I would like to emphasize to you, personally.

One of the things that most needs changing -- and I have high hopes of your own ^{ABILITY} ~~validity~~ to support this -- is the state of ignorance of VietNam and the nature of our problems here, that has managed to perpetuate itself over the years at the Mission Council level. A separate need is for the demonstration of leadership at the highest civilian levels in Saigon -- willingness to command, to intervene and influence in both military and Vietnamese affairs, to take over all responsibility for our policies and programs in VietNam and to set an example of our work and dedication to our purposes here.

But, I wish to focus here upon ^{THE} a particular need for informed leadership -- a willingness on the part of the highest civilian levels to learn, to hear (and to pass on to Washington) unpleasant realities from the field. I would urge you, personally, to aim at being the best informed, most knowledgeable man in Saigon about problems and affairs, both in Saigon and the field; you have an excellent start on this already and, in fact, the only danger I would see is that you might well be struck by hubris as you look around the table at your colleagues and come to feel

that it was not urgent to get any further ahead of them in your grasp of Vietnamese realities. The ^{harsh} truth is that it is not good enough -- not enough to avoid the worst kind of personal and national failure here -- just to know more than your past and current colleagues in Washington and Saigon (that is the kind of standard that the Vietnamese and MACV Advisors like to set for themselves; the ARVN 5th Division draws comfort from comparing itself to the ARVN 25th, never to the VC or to the demands of beating the VC).

How can you ^{do better?} achieve this? Some of the methods already have been used ^{by you} effectively; maintain multiple private channels of information and suggestions; talk privately -- ^{involve} do a lot of listening to knowledgeable subordinates, not relying exclusively upon formal reports through the chain of command or upon opinions expressed publicly in the presence of superiors. I would add:

a. Maximum use of field trips (neither Lodge, Porter, nor Latham showed the willingness to practice field command or inspection in the manner of a Westmoreland or a Depuy, thus denying themselves many benefits of influence, inspiration and information). On these trips, you should take maximum opportunity for individual private talks, both with US field workers and with Vietnamese. Such trips will give you opportunity to provide inspiration and motivation to the field personnel. But, I believe that the very best way to accomplish this is by showing interest in hearing their views and concerns, followed by decisive action of your Saigon command post. A real problem here in the last year has been increasing ^{from} demoralization of some of the ^{most} experienced and dedicated Americans, resulting from their feeling that no superior was interested in hearing their views and warnings. Even some of the best of these superiors seemed almost constitutionally unable to listen to them, and were specifically inaccessible to subordinates. As a result, they were slow learners and US interests suffered, along with the morale and motivations of their experienced subordinates.

It is fine to encourage people -- as I take it from comments on your last two visits you have felt ^{GIVE} prone to do -- but the strongest encouragement you can ^{GIVE} get is the spectacle of a superior who is not cast in the same mold of imperviousness to information and, specifically, ^{to} unpleasant information and to heretical advice.

b. Vietnamese. You should aim to have much more ^{PRIVATE} ~~vital~~, informal, direct contact with a variety of Vietnamese informants, both governmental and public, than past members of the Mission Council have done. Our whole machinery over

here, in fact, suffers from inadequate contact with Vietnamese. But you should not, in any case, rely wholly on the subordinate machinery to provide your inputs from Vietnamese.

c. Among Americans, it is the ones with the longest experience in VietNam and related situations that can give you the most useful insights and ^{MANY} most of these, at any given time, are outside the governmental bureaucracy: This includes, in particular, some representative newsmen (like Sol Sanders, of US News and World Report, Bob Shaplan and Takasha Oka,) along with researchers and academics like Jerry Hickey, of Rand. Most such people comment that they have close to no contact with US officials and their long background is in no way exploited by the Mission. (A man like Sol Sanders -- who has worked for 20 years in this area -- has contacts among the Vietnamese that are far broader and more intimate than any member of the Mission, and his ability to size up a political crisis quickly on the basis of these contacts, and his long continuous experience, can often, I suspect, out-pace any agency, or the Mission as a whole -- this is a resource which he and the few others like him would be glad to put at the disposal of the Mission, for patriotic motives and on a confidential basis -- if anyone had ever asked them).

d. OCO and the pacification process can benefit from much more input from the political section, OSA and military J-2 agencies than it has been getting; there should be more liaison with these agencies and more tasking of them for research, comments or specific data in the pacification area (the lending of members of the Political Section to the Regions is a good step in this direction).

e. The Monthly Special Joint Reports from the Province Teams are the most objective and comprehensive source of information of all the current problems and conditions in the countryside and they deserve your personal attention (the common belief among Province Team members that these reports were being read personally by the Deputy Ambassador was a great morale builder and contributed strongly to the honesty and informativeness of this reporting; the belief was incorrect, but it should not have been and I didn't disabuse anyone). The devices of ^{RE} acquiring joint signatures and of by-passing ^{INTERMEDIATE} ~~adequate~~ layers of ^{COMMAND} (except for information purposes) have proved to be very effective in achieving honest relevant reporting and should be extended to other areas; for instance, to report from the Division level and, perhaps, to more joint Vietnamese/US reporting.

You should also look personally -- at least a skim -- at the MACV SAMEs (Senior Advisors Monthly Evaluation), which MACV has been extremely chary about, showing to any civilians, perhaps because they ^{give} get the most honest picture at the advisory level.

f. You should make a strong effort to inform yourself about the past and, specifically, about the ~~routes~~^{roots} in the recent past, of ongoing programs and policies. It is impossible to interpret Vietnamese reactions to some of these policies and programs, or to understand why they are failing, without knowing the bureaucratic history of their origin: something that the Vietnamese are likely to know much better than the American newcomers. These are the matters of bureaucratic history, not to be found in books and newspapers.

To avoid the myriad of errors and false starts that come from the almost universal American trait of acting as if history had started the day one arrived on the scene, it should be well worthwhile to commission some quick, ~~competent~~^{compact} case histories of programs and policies, whose effects are still *being* felt in the current situation; for instance, the strategic hamlets program; the Buddhist struggle movements; Hop Tac and the National Priority Area; the PATS and RD Cadre; FULRO and the Montagnards; coups -- abortive and successful -- since November of 1960; and the Vietnamese view of the US role in these. Such studies -- which, I reiterate, you need personally -- might be the work of a research section within OCO, which is needed for other purposes as well. A first quick cut -- and I think a most valuable one -- ^{QV} to these matters could be based upon the memories of individuals who had personal contact with the programs or events and who still remain in Vietnam (in some cases, not for much longer).

g. In addition to absorbing information from all of these sources, you should do something that no other high level American administrator connected with Vietnam has ever done to discourage the bureaucratic ~~programs~~^{practices} that poison this flow of information: You should take stringent steps to punish lying, evasion and the concealing of information. You should make no apologies whatever for exploiting to the fullest, *informal* channels of information, to check official reporting, bypassing layers of command and utilizing special representatives as fact finders, responding in a harsh and discouraging way to every instance, military and civilian, of a) lying to you and the President and b) encouraging or acquiring subordinates to lie to you and the President.

In sum, while I strongly feel it is urgent that the new team, before long, inaugurate marked substantive changes, both in policy (in particular, in the sphere of Vietnamese politics and national leadership) and in tactics (in particular, our relationship with the Vietnamese Government and armed forces), I suggest that the initial focus of the new team should be not so much "What should we do?" but "What should we look into, learn, re-examine?" and, beyond the initial phase, ^{YAY} should be restructuring the information system, the local capabilities for research, analysis and reporting, to assure both you and Washington a better education on fundamentals and a better warning system on current problems than either the

Mission or the President has ever enjoyed in the past (a specific task, which should be started soon, is a comprehensive examination of the adequacy of all the local "finding-out" agencies and resources: the Political Section, JUSPAO, OCO field teams, OSA in Saigon and in the field, J-2 and all military intelligence agencies, MACV Advisory Reporting, Rand and other research efforts. More coordination would probably be useful, both in the direction of the collection effort and, even more, in analysis and dissemination; but, I suspect that even more dramatic inadequacies will show up in the individual agency efforts, themselves and in gaps uncovered by any agency).

I am pressing these matters with you, because I have every expectation that you will be responsive to this point of view; that is my impression -- a very gratifying one -- from dealing with you on VietNam -- and it is the impression I find from everyone here who has had occasion to work with you closely.

But, let me turn now to another subject, a very personal one, which is related to the above only in an ironic way. As is clear from the rather shocking ~~bureaucratic~~ ^{JOURNALISTIC} evaluations of your appointment here, which I read in the hospital in Bangkok, you have an image problem that could impair your effectiveness. The first question is, "Who is it with?" Is it the OCO personnel, as the newspaper stories imply? Is it civilians outside OCO, or MACV officers? I suspected immediately upon reading the stories -- and I have found some confirmation since I returned -- that the attitudes reflected in those stories belong to none of those groups, but to the reporters, themselves. This guess was based upon some factual evidence: I had already become aware and had intended to alert you of the existence, among the reporters I encountered, both in Saigon and Washington-based visitors, of strongly negative attitudes and suspicions, related to you. The ironic aspect is that these attitudes add up to a picture of you that is almost exactly opposite to reality: a person uninterested in facts, inaccessible to subordinates, impervious to unoptimistic views, interested only in presenting a rosy or wishful picture to the President and the public. This is the impression from reporters (and I am sorry to say, respectable and intelligent reporters) before I left for Bangkok and I find, in talking to people the last day or two, that it is the preconception with which reporters approached interviewees after Guan (when one official -- who does not happen to have a marked ~~Ly~~ ^{Ly} ~~dislike~~ or warm relationship with you -- protested that this picture was precisely wrong in every respect and, indeed, was probably less true of you than of any high-level official to work or visit here -- he was later called by an acquaintance in the same news bureau (Time) and asked "Why he was deliberately trying to whitewash you and snow the reporters?" Others report almost exactly the same experience with other reporters and agencies).

This problem is not as important as the substantive ones facing you, but it is a problem nevertheless. Since the reporters image is so foreign to reality, it should be changeable, but this won't happen without some deliberate effort to change it. It seems to have two bases:

a. The report on The Other War and their notion of your motivations in writing that (there are some specific misconceptions, such as the common belief that the report gives a rosy picture of pacification, ignoring the distinction that it makes fairly clearly between pacification -- treated fairly cautiously and other civil affairs).

b. Your background and interviews with the Saigon press in your last two visits. I am sorry to say -- and I presume to say it only as an old friend, which gives me some responsibilities -- that your own impression (and Montague's) that these ~~have been~~^{WERE} successful ventures in press relations, was incorrect. This became evident immediately after these sessions, in the reactions of nearly all the reports I heard (and, I am told, of JUSPAO press officers who were present). The "aggressive" ~~stance~~^{STANCE} you described to me did not, as it turns out, go down well, and had the effect of confirming suspicions they already had that you were not open to unpleasant realities. I think this is an impression which could easily be dispelled and it would be worth doing so, since, to repeat, it is held by experienced, responsible reporters, whose opinions are worth influencing and who can, in fact, ~~be~~^{be} useful sources of information to you in the future.

A specific suggestion would be to reveal to them the trait that is, in fact, one of your strongest points and which, I hope, will continue to be a strength over here, not how much you know (creditable as that is, in the amount of time you have had compared to nearly all of your colleagues), but how willing you are to learn. In addition, qualities of mind and attitude that make a strong positive impression on experienced reporters here (as on experienced Government officials) are: realism; awareness of complexities; awareness of past history; willingness to hear unpleasant or pessimistic facts, estimates and evaluations (many experienced reporters and Vietnamese, for example, faulted Habib on the second and third of these points. Since these are qualities you actually demonstrate to all those you are working with, it is only necessary to note that it would be useful to demonstrate these as well to the press.

There is a great deal more to say and I hate to end on this sour note, but I am anxious to try to get this off to you immediately, so I will postpone other thoughts to a later letter or until your arrival. To put the above discussion in a more positive light, the fact is that contrary to the newspaper accounts, I believe that your arrival is anticipated by most officials with a great deal of hope; and certainly I, who know you better than most of them, have that anticipation. Whether or not you are happy that you are coming here, I am, because I do care what

happens here and you are very strongly needed. So long as I am here,
and even longer, you can count on my help.

Yours,